



Review

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Female Friendships and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell. By PAULINE NESTOR. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection. By JANICE G. RAYMOND. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930. By SHEILA JEFFREYS. London: Pandora, 1985.

Marilyn Lake, University of Melbourne

In Australia in the nineteenth century, an excess of men generated a celebrated national tradition called “mateship.” In Britain, whence most of the men or their parents had come, an excess of females produced a social problem—the “redundant woman.” As Pauline Nestor reminds us in *Female Friendships and Communities*, we must examine the metaphor that creates the experience as well as the experience that generates the metaphor. And even when in a minority, men have generally retained control over metaphor production, the power of definition, of naming, of determining the meaning of experience. And hetero-reality can manage some breath-taking metamorphoses. Thus women together, as Janice Raymond notes in *A Passion for Friends* become women alone, as when the man approaches the four women sitting together in a bar and asks: “Hey, what are you doing here sitting all alone?” (3). As feminists increasingly define their aims in terms of autonomy rather than equality, the history and future possibilities of female friendship and female self-reliance excite new interest.

Female friendship has an interesting history. Pauline Nestor, in *Female Friendships and Communities*, examines the relationships between women in the lives and fiction of three nineteenth-century English authors: Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. All three were writing at a time when the woman question was a subject of public debate, when contemplation of the “redundant” or “superabundant” woman inspired “a multitude of counsellors” (8) to ponder the fate and prospects of women without men. By examining the lives of the novelists, Nestor offers an enriched reading of their novels. Her vast research and elegant prose make for informative reading. The texts are not treated, however, as mere reflections of the authors’ opinions but are seen to offer access to “deeper levels of consciousness” (2). Ambivalence and ambiguity are major themes in the book. Thus despite Gaskell’s confession in a letter of “taking to men so much more than women” (41), the truth of her fiction reveals a more complex and primary allegiance to women based on the fundamental bonds of motherhood and women’s shared lot as men’s victims.

While Gaskell is able—in *Cranford*—to contemplate a community of women as a viable and pleasurable enterprise, the unmarried Charlotte Brontë is ambivalent about spinsterhood and suspicious of communities. In her fiction she is powerfully attracted to the idea of a union of equality between woman and man, but in her final novel, *Villette*, she has her heroine opting for an “empire over self,” a state of self-containment and self-sufficiency (140). George Eliot, socially isolated like Brontë, but for different reasons, vowed that she preferred her state of “ex-communication” from society. Feted as a novelist, Eliot was often dismissive of other women writers and scornful of their efforts to emulate her achievement. “Never for one instant,” observed the waspish Eliza Lynn Linton, “did she forget her self-created Self” (144). This self-importance, argues Nestor, was a barrier to easy interaction between Eliot and other women. In both her life and her fiction, Eliot is seen as very male-oriented. In her novels, women are in a state of necessary acquiescence to male protagonists. The male as partner in Brontë’s novels becomes the male as savior in Eliot’s. Nestor concludes by stressing the differences of attitude and treatment between the writers, the range of possibilities. There was no “woman’s view” (205–6). But perhaps she underestimates the significance of the common experience. As she herself suggests earlier in the book, all three writers shared that historically specific form of female friendship analyzed so well by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (“The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 1 [Autumn 1975]: 1–29). All three writers experienced friendships that involved emotional and physical intimacy, verbal and physical declarations of love, kisses, and caresses. Gaskell and Eliot were also married. As Smith-Rosenberg has argued, their range of emotional experience defies twentieth-century categorization. Even the stern and male-oriented George Eliot was capable of addressing her friend Sara Hennell as “Dearly beloved spouse,” exclaiming: “How I wish I could kiss you and talk to you” (148). While men bemoan the repression of the Victorian era, research into women’s history increasingly points to an opposite interpretation suggesting how inhibiting the sexual revolution has been for women. To read the writings of Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot is to rediscover a world whose range and richness of relationships we have lost.

What happened to the passion, intimacies, and sensuousness of female friendships? Sheila Jeffreys addresses the history of female friendship in her important reinterpretation of the nineteenth-century feminist movement. *The Spinster and Her Enemies* is an interpretation that will not win her many admirers among male

historians who prefer to understand feminism as fighting for masculine goals such as the right to vote and the right to work. Yet, as Jeffreys demonstrates, a critique of male sexual behavior was central to nineteenth-century feminism in Britain (as with feminists such as Rose Scott and Bessie Lee in Australia). It flowed from women's assertion of their right to autonomy and bodily integrity, it led to campaigns to raise the age of consent, and it generated a preoccupation with prostitution as the paradigm of women's condition. Jeffreys argues that this multifaceted campaign to re-form male sexual behavior was defeated by the science of sexology, which effectively conscripted women into heterosexuality and stigmatized the recalcitrant as frigid, a label newly pressed into service in the 1920s (169–70). Women's passionate friendships were scientifically categorized as homosexuality, and lesbians were henceforth ostracized as deviant. Love between women had lost its innocence. Whereas nineteenth-century feminists had championed a spiritual ideal of companionate marriage (as far removed from the relationship of prostitution as possible), by the 1920s sex had become, in the advice manuals which proliferated, the very foundation of marriage.

It is Janice Raymond's mission to rescue female friendship from the distortions and manipulations of "hetero-reality" and transform it into a "profoundly political act" (29). She presents her philosophy as a theory of women's empowerment, as an account of the possibilities of women's sustaining relations with women. The sentiments behind the slogan "sisterhood is powerful" are developed into a sustained argument. But as the argument proceeds, the sisterhood, despite the disclaimers, begins to look rather exclusive. Friendship as a political strategy seems to have its limitations.

Although Raymond's term "Gyn/affection" is meant to signify a continuum of female friendship, a separate lesbian existence is clearly the desirable mode. "More than any other group of women lesbian feminists have shrunk the power of hetero-reality!" (14). They and other "loose" women are the heroines of her account. Women who have been coached into hetero-relationships receive short shrift, as do theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein who argue the necessity of male participation in child care as a precondition of women's liberation. They are reprimanded for providing models of reformed hetero-relations, rather than the "prescription" that women should form new relations with women.

Although Raymond stresses the importance of worldliness for feminists and describes herself as a critical materialist, her analysis is at times most unworldly. Believing that "the power of hetero-relations derives from their idealization" (13), the material con-

straints on women's lives tend to escape her vision. Thus the objection that coparenting will give men more power than they have at present fails to comprehend the point made by writers such as Anne Phillips, Anna Coote, and Mary O'Brien: that men's dominance of public life—their power—is predicated on their absenteeism from child care and domestic work. Is the perpetuation of this sexual division of labor and the double burden of women compatible with their emancipation? Significantly, Raymond's loose women, her free women—the virgin, the nun, the older woman, and the lesbian—would all seem to be free not only from men but also from children.

The meaning of feminism is not constant and at any one time its objectives may be variously defined. When the goal of equality with men is replaced by freedom from men, compulsory heterosexuality would seem to give way to obligatory homosexuality. It may seem to some that the new prescriptions are as tyrannical and confining as the old. Caught within the dichotomies devised, as Jeffreys showed, by sexologists to categorize and control women, Raymond's philosophy, the terms of her discourse, and her classifying impulse may all be seen as an ironic testament to the success of their achievement: which side are you on? Which is not to say that hegemonic constructs may not be grasped by subordinate groups and turned to subversive uses.

Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920. By MARTHA VICINUS. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, University of Pennsylvania

To the independent women scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, the independent women of Edwardian England appear as feminist heroes and fictive mothers. We thrill to their assertions of women's right to independence, equality, and creative work. We see them enacting on the grand scale of history the same struggles against social conventions and private fears that we each have had to make in order to assert our own independence, to demand equality, to work creatively. It is scarcely surprising then that we have seldom subjected them to close, scholarly scrutiny; they play too critical a political and psychological role for us. With notable exceptions, we have been content to shroud Edwardian England's independent women within a scholarly twilight of the goddesses, that is, to represent them as they politically and militantly presented themselves.